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ABSTRACT

Due to urbanization and the information explosion, children today grow up under entirely different conditions than they did only 70 to 80 years ago. Now, families have less opportunity than before to communicate their culture to their children. Rather, the images children see on television programs intended for adults influence the picture they form of the adult world. Violence, the characteristic element of those images, should be eliminated, and programs addressed to real experience should be shown. For example, in Sweden programs for immigrant children that depict their native culture in their own language are being produced. The number of media environments to which children will be exposed will increase in the future. Therefore, media literacy should be taught to enable children to produce, analyze, and thereby, as adults, effectively control the media. Additionally, media messages which conflict with social standards must be counteracted. Programs for the entire family should be produced, and TV should be used to restore social relations and a community spirit. (Author/RH)

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Address at "The family and television" conference in London, March 5, 1980 arranged by the London University .

The interaction between changing family patterns and high TV consumption

Let me begin by saying thank you for being given an opportunity to come here. First of all I would like to tell you in a few words something about the work of the Children's Ombudsman. The Children's Ombudsman is employed by Rädda Barnen - the Swedish Save the Children Fund, which is a non-governmental organization. Briefly the work of the Children's Ombudsman consists of:

- informing people about the needs and rights of children and the conditions under which they live, partly through massmedia, lectures, publications and seminars,
- exerting pressure on the authorities and politicians,
- suggesting and initiating actions for the improvement of children's conditions,
- helping children who suffer from special problems, such as immigrant children, foster-children who are ill-treated, etc.,
- support child research,
- persuading more people to work for the benefit of children,
- supporting and assisting individual children in distress among other things by means of a telephone service.

The main emphasis, then, is on watching over the rights of children and making sure that their needs are satisfied. Our work is naturally concerned

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mainly with those children who have difficulties in our society. That is the basis on my speech here today.

David Frost once said something more or less as follows: "I imagine Hell to be a place where the language is Dutch, the cooks are English, the police are German, the politicians are Russian and the television programmes are Swedish".

In spite of this put-down about Sweden when it comes to television I shall nevertheless be bold enough to discuss the TV medium of today and tomorrow, putting it into perspective with the way family life has developed and can be expected to develop. I will concentrate on these problems from the premise that all children have the right to grow up into full and good members of society.

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Family life in the western world has undergone a major change in the present century. Early in the 20th century it was still the natural thing to live one's whole life in the same place. People communicated chiefly by meeting each other, even though the printed word was comparatively widespread. We lived in a system where older generations and relatives were around us the whole time. Often everybody worked together on the land or with handicraft. The women cleaned, washed and sew for others. The world was very small in the sence that people were immobile and had very little information about the world outside their own village.

Then came an explosion. It began with urbanization, the result of which was that to a large extent we broke away from the social community that previously existed. Women appeared more and more on the open labour market. Children had to stay at school longer. The middle of the century saw the arrival of the information explosion. Radio had already long been accepted and TV became the new medium. Nearly everyone could read and newspapers were common in people's homes.

As a result of all this, children grow up under entirely different conditions today than they did only 70-80 years ago. It is now the rule rather than the exception that both parents go out to work. We have also seen an explosion in divorces. Today it is estimated that 20% of all Swedish

children live in single-parent households. Since we continue to move a lot, fewer and fewer families have deep social roots in their residential areas today. This has led to a strong sense of privatism, one expression of which is that mainly we only stand up for our own kids and don't bother about other people's children. Even in my own childhood all adults still looked after all children. Children of today grow up to a large extent in a children's world which is dominated by other children. The impression they get of adults is often fragmentary. While growing up, children are together with many different adults for short periods of the day. Many children have no stable relations with adults.

In the morning they meet their parents, then perhaps a nursery-school teacher or a school-mistress, later in the day at best the staff of some form of leisuretime activity centre or in the worst case they are alone at home, and finally they are together with their parents for a few hours in the evening. We have also witnessed a dissolution of the common norms that characterised our earlier society to a large extent. Pluralism has become an accepted concept.

All these trends have interacted in so far as they have combined to obstruct the family's opportunities of cultural transfer to children. Children meet many different cultures at different places in our society today. Time for passing on ethical principles by setting a good example is minimal. This is also because we adults, when we come home

to our children, are perhaps tired and need time to ourselves or, if we are women, have to devote all our time wholeheartedly to household chores. Men obviously have a greater need to relax since they are more often seen reading a paper or watching TV! The transfer of norms to the next generation accordingly rests to a great extent on others rather than on the adults in the traditional family. Numerous symptoms indicate that children find this situation troublesome. A Swedish survey comparing children in different countries shows that 11% of the Swedish children interviewed who were 11 years of age said they felt that no grown-up ever liked them. These children also

said they preferred the company of friends and animals rather than that of adults. There are also special groups of children who have a particularly difficult time of it in our present-day industrialised society. One such group consists of immigrant children who are often torn between different standards of behaviour in their homes and in society at large. The picture of adult ethics these children gain depends on the pictures they meet in their new country and in the tension between the standards applied at home and those of society in general.

This is a starting point for the way in which we should regard TV viewing by children. It has been proved that children watch television a lot. Television is also an important means of informing children about the way the

adult world works or ought to work, and the values we adults put highest. Swedish surveys show that children in Sweden between ages 9 and 14 watch television for an average of 2¼ hours a day. It should perhaps be mentioned here that Sweden only has two TV channels, both of which are on the air for much less time than here in England.

This might not be so bad but if we break down the average figure we see that 8% of the 9-14 year-olds watch TV for five hours or more a day. A pronounced increase in viewing took place in Sweden when we introduced our second TV channel. Children then started to watch twice as much as before. We also know that these

children predominately watch entertainment programmes intended for adults. Proportionally, this age-group is the largest consumer of these particular programmes. We also know that among this 8 % we can find those children who have problems in their relations with friends, the school and their parents. If we then calculate how much of their waking hours are spent in front of the TV in relation to their other activities it turns out that they spend one-third of their time in front of the TV screen. We may further assume that these children spend about one-third of their time at school. This leaves 3-4 hours in which they have an opportunity to be together with others. I presume you all know that an average pupil who leaves High School in the United States has spent more time watching TV than in the classroom. Sweden are probably soon there.

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In England children watch TV more than in Sweden. A survey from 1978 shows that 91 % of the age-group 7-10 watches TV every day. 18 % of them watches TV 5 hours/day and 6 % watches 7 hours every day. That means that they sit in front of the Television almost half the time they are awake. In one year they spend 2 548 hours in front of the TV-set. The children here also prefers Action Thrillers, Cartrons, Pop Music, Sports and Westerns. Starsky and Hutch were their favourite TV-stars. This amount of TV-consumption naturally has implications for the health of these children as well as the picture they form of the adult world. One conclusion to be drawn from these children's channels of information regarding adult life and the goals that are worth striving for is that most of what they learn comes from TV and the school. "All children.... believe in the values of the world around them and to begin with they are not revolutionary but conservative in the

extreme," Nobert Wiener has expressed it. Children want the approval of others and rewards for coming up to the expectations of others. In all probability they yearn for approval and rewards sufficiently strongly to overcome the universal human laziness that acts as a stabilizer.

If we then take a look at the content of the message on the TV screen, we ought to react. Violence is a characteristic element, even more in England than in Sweden. Crime shows like Kojak and others, which point out that as long as I have the right on my side I have the right to kill, do not give the people receiving the message any chance of analysing the characters of the villains as everything is painted in black and white. This blunts the normal reaction to violence and also unfortunately shows children ways of using violence. We were given an unpleasant reminder of this in Sweden last

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autumn when a gang of youths threw a Molotov cocktail into a tram full of people after having seen the film "The Warriors". It is also a fact that this age-group is a high consumer of entertainment programmes which they cannot see at ordinary cinemas because of the age limit. Censoring films shown at cinemas seems rather absurd when we spoon-feed these children with the same films on television.

Looking at the programmes these age-groups chiefly watch and the message-content of the programmes, it is hard not to wonder what kind of impression we want to give children and what kind of standards we intend to set for them. We all know that they can be influenced by TV. Far from least aware of this are advertisers who spend large sums of money on advertising. Ought it not to be so that we should

primarily use TV to exemplify standards and values which we adults think are good and worthwhile? All the more so since the medium is limited to a comparatively small number of producers on account of present-day cost levels. But no! We do quite the opposite. The exciting programmes and the programmes we surround with glamour, etc. often reflect standards that I personally do not believe are favoured by many adults. In parenthesis, I have never understood how the United States as a nation has taken upon itself to export so much violence and so many false pictures of that great and amazing country. Pictures that children believe are real because that is all they see. The impression many children - and grown-ups, too, for that matter - gain of the United States is what they see in shows like Kojak, Ironman, etc.

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Let me now digress for a moment about violence. More and more researchers, organizations and individuals have turned against the TV violence. Dr William Belson here in England has carried out pioneering studies of the effect of TV violence on boys. Unfortunately, TV companies and the general public often repudiate the views presented. Public discussion has perhaps also been conducted at times as though violence on TV were the only reason why more and more young people today resort to violence in their daily lives. This is of course not true. On the other hand, if TV violence is put in its right context, being part of all the violence to which children are exposed, it will soon be realized that it is of significance. Children of today

grow up in a world of violence. Through the mass-media is war an everyday occurrence. The structure of many societies tends to expose children to violence. Road traffic reaps its victims. Family violence has its given place in most countries. Here in England you even allow the teachers to beat your children.

Violence on TV, in comics and in pornographic magazines gives children a vivid picture of the ideals of the adult world. We adults all dream about a world at peace. About a world where violence as a means of solving conflicts is replaced by other methods. By methods that it behooves intelligent beings to use. To progress this far we must instil constructive ways of solving conflicts into future generations. After all, children learn from observing how we adults behave. If we can reduce the amount of violence children are exposed to we will also have a chance to help

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bring about a world at peace and everyday life without violence. The elimination of TV violence can and should be the first step, simply because it is easy to take if we really want to. Family violence, violence in traffic, between nations, etc. is naturally more difficult to tackle. TV violence is the first brick we should remove from the wall of violence.

Let me now say something about the minority groups. Children who move from their home-country to Sweden or England often find themselves in a conflict of cultures, as I mentioned earlier. We cannot and of course should not expect their parents to abandon their own culture completely when they change

countries. We are not prepared to do this ourselves if we move to another country. Their culture is naturally also a part of their identity. Immigrant children nevertheless encounter, both in society and through television entirely different values then they meet at home. Values that they often do not fully understand because of their imperfect command of the language. A Swedish scientist once remarked how extraordinary it is that those who watch TV the most are those who least understand what they see. This naturally applies to children in general but perhaps most of all to children from other countries. They look at the pictures we show them without being able to understand the background behind the story unfolding before their eyes. Here in England you even dub programmes in their home languages, which has the effect of both making it harder for them to recognize themselves and also removes one of their chances of improving and maintaining their language proficiency.

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In Sweden we are trying to, at the greatest extent, create language homogenous groups in the kindergartens and also in the ordinary schools. We think this is necessary so that we can help the immigrant children to maintain and develop their mother-tongue. This is nevertheless not enough. Even outside the school and kindergarten these children must be able to meet their language and their culture. The Children's departments at the Swedish Television are also, to a greater extent as before, making and sending programs in the main immigrant languages. We have to help the immigrant children's development by showing a sufficient number of programmes in their own language and by pointing to problems they themselves consider relevant in their new society. We must try to show programmes produced in their home countries, which would enable them to keep in touch with their culture and tell the rest of us more about their background. Instead of this we dedicate ourselves to a flight from reality. Well, after

all, people want to be entertained, someone might say. Yes, of course we do. We all like to relax now and again with some excitement or something of beauty. But what is exciting and beautiful need not necessarily reflect values we do not want. Of course, it might be so that the need to escape from reality increases in proportion to the problems in society. Parallels can be found between the present-day situation and the gay life of the 'twenties' and 'thirties'.

Let me now try to give you a vision of the future. I want to do so not because I believe that I can look into the future more accurately than others, but because it is necessary for each and every one of us to try and anticipate what can be expected and base our actions on these conceptions.

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We can look forward to another explosion in the sphere of information. Already more than half of all employees in the United States are engaged either directly or indirectly on matters relating to information. Experiments have already been carried out in Japan where participating households have a camera, a small keyboard, microphones and control units for a home terminal while outside are mobile film units and cars and minibuses with video cameras and monitors. These Japanese can see at least 2-3 hours of locally produced programmes every day, entertainment programmes are repeated twice at other times of the day, on weekdays there is a show aimed at housewives in the morning, schoolchildren can see a one-hour programme at lunchtime and in the afternoon another programme for housewives is broadcasted, this time of an educational nature. A show for the whole family is broadcasted on Sundays while music programmes are scheduled late on Friday and Saturday evenings. This is of

course not all that the Japanese can see on the 32-odd TV channels available through the system. Programmes from other TV companies are rebroadcasted. Furthermore, by means of the keyboard viewers can order a number of additional services. 60 video cassettes can be requested for viewing and a number of still pictures can also be ordered. Textual information can be displayed on the screen - messages about the weather, train times, addresses, news, medicine, a programme guide, etc.

In the future we will be able to have a TV screen built into our wrist-watch, we will have satellites to relay pictures from the whole world to practically all TV sets, TV screens will be bigger so that the image is more lifelike. The BBC has become engaged in this by putting forward a proposal for

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relaying non-standard broadcast television directly from a satellite. This involves high-resolution TV with a two-metre wide screen having the proportions of 8 to 3 (which is roughly the same proportions as a CinemaScope screen at the cinema). Initially, this system was conceived principally for collective viewing but from a technical point of view it will soon be possible to fill a whole wall at home with this suggestive TV image. We will be able to have personal computers and optical video record players in every home. We can conceive of a small cassette loaded with a full-length feature film which we borrow from the library just like a book and when we have seen it we merely exchange it for another. All this is technically possible and solely from the viewpoint of

offering entertainment perhaps also desirable. Whether or not everything that is technically possible will also be economically justified is something else again. Socially desirable it is definitely not. At least, not unless we bring about greatly increased awareness of the risks associated with technical progress and also make sure that we all have a chance to defend ourselves against the horrors this development entails. Otherwise the danger is that we will have a new elite with its power based on access to information channels and knowledge about them. The world we live in is also in danger of becoming even more fragmentary as social trends move towards increased isolation and less continuity. Continuity is an honourable concept when it concerns a child's development. If we look ahead,

however, we see there is a real danger of children being forced to grow up in an even larger number of environments than they do today. Mobility in the labour market makes it more necessary to move from one environment to another. The rightful demands of women for gainful employment have not been answered by men taking more responsibility for family life. We assume less and less responsibility for children other than our own. Children, and some adults, too, for that matter, will understand less and less of reality as it grows more complicated. Childhood, or the unproductive part of our lives, is in danger of being extended still further as a result of the diminishing demand of labour.

There is a danger of increasing anxiety among adults and children alike, partly because reality at various points around the globe is coming closer and closer. If the suggestive power of the media that present us with reality also increases at the same time as we feel more and more powerless to do anything about this reality, then a feeling of impotence is not far away. Neither will we, in the various societies existing on earth, be able to control the contents of the media and children will be bewildered by many conflicting impressions.

This is no vision of horror. It is only a description of future reality. It will come to pass unless we do something about it. What needs to be done, then? Well, quite a number

of things in the sphere of human relations. But in this connection let me concentrate on measures that have a bearing on television.

Today we teach children at school to read a text critically and also, in the best case, to look behind the written word as we encounter it in newspapers, etc. We still do not have such general education as regards the medium of television. In actual fact, we are all practically illiterate when it comes to critical media knowledge. We must learn to read and write all over again. That is to say, everyone must be able to see what lies behind the TV images and examine them with a critical eye. We must also be able to produce them. A new gigantic literacy campaign must be mounted. Experiments in

Sweden show that people who have had an opportunity to create TV programmes themselves find it much easier to analyse what they see on the TV screen. The knowledge to do this must be a human right in the future.

We must also counteract the messages the medium brings us which conflict with our standards. It is said that the BBC has adopted recommendations for its producers with regard to the effect of violence on TV. Unfortunately, a quick glance through the TV-Times shows that little heed is paid to these recommendations. I nonetheless believe that this is the right way to go about the matter. With research as a basis for formulating a policy, that producers and other creators of messages should follow, and justify any departures from. Then it will be easier for ordinary people outside

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the medium to bring pressure to bear so that its influence is kept within reasonable bounds. In Sweden there is a Radio Board to which people can complain about programmes they think have broken the agreement concluded between the Swedish State and the Swedish state-owned television company. This may be regarded as a safety valve. Now some of you may assert that I am campaigning for widespread censorship. But that is not what I mean. At the same time, though, I am against those who consider that everything should be broadcasted because people must be left to choose for themselves what they want to view. But no genuine freedom of choice can ever exist. Freedom is based on awareness and knowledge. Many people, children above all, do not possess these two necessities for making a free choice. We also

know that children to a large extent choose what they want to view themselves. A common objection to this is that it must be left to the parents to decide what their children see on TV. Well, that sounds fine to begin with, but if we analyse what it really means then such a demand would have devistating consequences. Firstly, not all children are allowed to do whatever they like even if their parents were to permit it. Society as such sets up certain rules for what is socially acceptable and what is not. By means of laws we try to prevent behaviour that we do not tolerate. We also know that many parents simply cannot cope with the task of assuming responsibility for their children. Parents who themselves have a history of untreated traumatic experiences. Parents who maybe drink to excess, parents who are perhaps

out of work or parents who have never been allowed to be children themselves and consequently relive their own lost childhood through the children they have brought into the world. In the latter case it is, then, a matter of protection for the children, because their parents do not have the necessary awareness, knowledge and security to enable them to make a choice, based on the premise that children should be turned into good citizens who fit into the society built up in different countries from different political points of departure. Neither in the case of cinemas do we allow parents to choose freely but have introduced restrictions in the case of films which we feel may have an adverse effect on children.

We must lend support to pressure groups and also provide them with the necessary conditions for critically studying the messages our media deliver. Bertrand Russell wrote in "The impact of science on society" that "without rebels and seething revolt no society can be truly progressive. Unfortunately, modern technology makes it increasingly difficult to be a rebel". Society and the communication media must lend a hand here and give the rebels enough room. Otherwise we will run the danger of further reinforcing a tendency that can already be discerned, namely that many people withdraw from the welfare society and either isolate themselves in small green islands or resort to violence with the long-term intention of shaking society to its foundations. If TV becomes a medium that is controlled by a few and in

addition is considered to promote undesirable effects, this will in the long run boomerang on the medium itself and also on society as a whole.

We should invest more in quality than in quantity. Most TV companies are presently passing through a time of unrest with diminishing revenue or cutbacks in government subsidies. As far as Sweden is concerned, this has compelled TV to fall back more and more on the cheap shows sold on the international market. TV runs the risk of becoming our new women's magazine's or a visually improved edition of Nick Carter. Instead of spending our resources on more channels, longer broadcasting hours and new satellites we ought to invest in better quality.

Unfortunately, many parents use TV as a baby sitter. In an American book I saw a recommendation not to leave babies alone in front of the TV too long. Just for a moment imagine the closeness, contact and human warmth that this recommendation contains.

At best, TV can be a stimulus to various activities when the programme ends. This is the exception, though. In parenthesis, let me just say here that Blue Peter is one of the exceptions I have seen in this respect. In the long term I nevertheless believe that we must perhaps veer away from special programmes for special age-groups. Throughout the entire spectrum of our social life we have constructed activities that result in us spending our time almost exclusively in the company of people of the same age

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and preferably also of the same sex. Soccer teams for 7-year-old boys and ballet classes for 8-year-old girls. TV programmes for 5-year-olds between 5 and 6 p.m. and for 8-year-olds between 6 and 7 p.m. Programmes for middle-aged housewives in the morning and for sports-crazy men late in the evening. In many countries we also have age-segregated groups at nurseries and at school this has long been a well-known phenomenon. We have, then, built up a social structure which is more and more based on associating solely with people of our own age. In the long term, we must break away from this form of regimentation. Obviously, not all TV programmes can be suitable for both a 5-year-old and a London University professor. Some do manage to achieve this feat, nonetheless. What we can do, however, is to go in more

and more for programmes produced for the whole family. Programmes that are playful and that teach simple things as well as contain excitement and love. This can be done without violence, discrimination of either sex or any race. What I have now said must not lead you to jump to the conclusion that I want to abandon the children's programs. No, it is the programs that are made solely for grown-ups that at first must be altered. Children do of course need programs especially adapted to their state of development.

We ought to utilize the medium of TV to restore social relations and a community spirit. Many members of the rising generation can scarcely associate without television. An all too common evening at home in Sweden or England unfortunately consists of the family sitting in silence watching TV during the time they are together. TV should

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stimulate people and induce them to take part in shared activities, to meet other people, the elderly, the handicapped, immigrants who perhaps sense antipathy in the air and feel lonely in their new surroundings far away from their homeland and their culture. TV should also to a greater extent take up problems that are felt to be of genuine interest and allocate resources for such programmes instead of the enormous effort that today goes into pop galas, films of violence, Miss World contests and much else that we could well do without. A series of programmes about the growing-up problems of a gypsy child was recently shown on TV in Sweden. Gypsies are one of the groups about which the average Swede has the most prejudices. As a result of the TV programmes, children suddenly had an opportunity to

understand what it feels like when we others systematically look down on gypsy children and do not recognize that they also have the right to feel welcome. I believe that programmes like this are of immense value.

Some of you may think that I have painted too gloomy a picture of the way TV affects family life and children. If I have, then I have done so on the basis of those children who have poor relations with other children and with adults and who we also know are avid consumers of TV. For these children the effects of TV interact. Other children, who have stable relations with their parents, with other adults and with other children are naturally better equipped to fend off any adverse effects of TV messages and the time

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they spend watching TV. With the possible development trends we nevertheless see today, there is considerable risk that the group of children who use the TV as a teddy bear and deputy adult will increase. With a manifestation of Robinsonism it could then perhaps be said that "it is better to have an attractive hallucination than an awful reality". But that would be giving up. In my work the main point must always be that of trying to create as good a world as possible for children. A world in which their needs are satisfied, where they can enjoy security and stimulation, where they feel that they have a purpose and are wanted and where we of the adult generation give them a chance to develop with constructive messages before their eyes.

Thank you.